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SUBJECT: JERUSALEM MEDIA REACTION (02/01): Settlement-related stories dominate the local press for the past three days

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Main Stories:  
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The dailies run front page stories on today's laying of the "foundation stone" for new houses in a settlement south of Hebron. The dailies quote Hebron mayor Al-Aaraj warning of an outbreak in violence if the Israeli government continues its settlement activities. Al-Ayyam and Al-Quds report on their front pages that Israeli forces are planning to re-occupy the "Osh Al-Ghorab" area in Beit Sahour. The IDF evacuated their military base from that area in 2006. Al-Quds reports that settlers welcome this step, hoping that they can turn it into a settlement post.

The dailies highlight Palestinian Authority (PA) President Mahmoud Abbas' visit to Berlin. A headline in Al-Quds quotes Abbas saying that there will be no negotiations with Israel before a complete freeze of all settlement activities. In a separate headline, Abbas is quoted in an interview with The Guardian saying that the continuation of settlement activities will result in a one state solution.

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Weekend stories:  
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Sunday, January 31:

Al-Quds runs a front page story reporting on the article that appeared in Time Magazine about the future of the peace process. The story reports that experts believe that the prospects of a two-state solution are declining and Palestinians' confidence in realizing peace is vanishing.

Al-Quds runs a separate front page story quoting Hatem Abdel Qader, the Fatah official responsible for Jerusalem affairs saying that the Israeli Parks Authority will confiscate 1000 dunums of land south of the Isawiyyeh neighbourhood in East Jerusalem to create a new national park. The plan includes demolishing dozens of homes and 250 residential units. Residents have been working on a plan to expand the neighbourhood for a few years due to natural growth and the hundreds of families who moved to Issawiyyeh over the past few years due to the construction of the separation wall. Abdel Qader said that the Israeli plan fails to take this into consideration.

Saturday, January 30

The local press highlight and the three dailies run front page stories on Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu saying yesterday that the Ariel settlement "will remain forever an integral part of the state of Israel and of Eretz Israel." Netanyahu added "we want to enhance peace and cooperation with our neighbours but this should not prevent us from living here and continuing to plant and build our lands. We are here in the heart of our country. Our forefathers lived here and we will continue to live here." Netanyahu made similar pledges and statements during his visits to the Gush Etzion settlement near Bethlehem and Ma'ale Adumim settlement east of Jerusalem.

Al-Quds and Al-Ayyam run front page stories on the Jerusalem Municipality's local committee for zoning and construction approving a plan to transform 660 dunums of land in the Isawiyyeh neighbourhood of East Jerusalem into a national park. This step will

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deprive the town of any possibilities for future expansion on its land, even though part of this approved land had previously been approved for expanding the Arab town, according to reports first published by the Israeli weekly Yerushalayym. The report added, "By approving the transformation of 660 dunums of lands at the slopes of Mount Scopus into a national park, part of which were set for expanding the Palestinian town, the committee proved that there is nothing better than using archaeological sites as a pretext for realizing political objectives and realities on the ground."

Al-Ayyam runs a front page story on Israeli sources confirming that Prime Minister Netanyahu agreed to a proposal made by Special Envoy George Mitchell whereby initial negotiations between the Israelis and Palestinians to be indirect, similar to those Turkey has conducted between Israel and Syria. The sources added "the proposal is for Mitchell to move back and forth between Jerusalem and Ramallah, conveying messages regarding the positions of both parties regarding the final status core issues. Following that, low-level negotiations may start to test whether or not it would be possible to move to the comprehensive mode of negotiations with the two leaders." According to the same sources, Mitchell made the same suggestion to President Abbas, who has not yet responded.

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BLOCK QUOTE:  
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Talal Okal opines in Al-Ayyam under the title "The Priority of Politics on Ground" saying, "The operation executed by Mosad agents in a Dubai hotel against Al-Qassam 'struggler and leader' Mahmoud Al-Mabhooh is starting to reveal itself slowly...The timing is important. If Israel wanted calm it wouldn't have executed the operation. It's clear that Israel is trying to lure reactions from Hamas and other Palestinian groups in its efforts to create an excuse to launch new wars."

RUBINSTEIN